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ABSTRACT

The history of the U.S. Office of Education's (OE) relationship with private accrediting agencies is traced. "Criteria for Nationally Recognized Accrediting Agencies and Associations" have been used to determine which accrediting agencies and associations are reliable authorities for identifying the quality of training offered by institutions or programs. Such recognition is linked to the determination of eligibility for federal funds. Additionally, a system of state approval agencies funded by the federal government has approved courses of study for enrollment of veterans and evaluated unaccredited programs of study. Policies developed in 1969 that affected the character of the Commissioner of Education's list of reliable authorities provided that each accrediting agency on the list will be reevaluated by the Commissioner at least once every four years and that the Commissioner will specifically define the accrediting agency's scope (i.e., the level and type of educational programs that they accredit). The original Criteria for Recognition (1952) were revised in 1969 to include additional provisions, including due process in considering applicants for accreditation. The 1974 revision of the Criteria added a criterion that reflects the quasi-public nature of accreditation. The following aspects of the Criteria are addressed: the functional aspects of accrediting agencies, their responsibility, their reliability, and their autonomy. The Division of Eligibility and Agency Evaluation of OE has assisted both federal and state agencies in developing an understanding of the accreditation process. OE has also funded research projects that can be directly beneficial to the accreditation community, and has sponsored or cosponsored conferences and forums on the topic. (SW)

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THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION AND THE ROLE OF ACCREDITATION

BY

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The formal relationship between the U.S. Office of Education and the private accreditation community began with the passage of the Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act of 1952, otherwise known as the Korean War G.I. Bill. The Act provided, for the first time, that the U.S. Commissioner of Education grant formal Federal recognition to accrediting agencies through publication of a list of recognized agencies.

During the hearings that took place in development of Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act, members of Congress made clear that Congress could not tolerate a repetition under this Act of the fraud and abuses of educational benefits which had occurred under the World War II Veterans Benefit Program.

In order to meet this concern, then, spokesmen for education associations made presentations during the Congressional hearings urging that the Federal government rely upon accrediting bodies for the purpose of identifying educational institutions of quality and legitimacy. The result was the charge to the U.S. Commissioner of Education to publish a list of nationally recognized accrediting agencies and associations that the Commissioner determined to be reliable authorities concerning the quality of education or training offered by educational institutions or programs. The Veterans Act also established a system of State approval agencies funded by the Federal government that function to approve courses of study for enrollment of veterans. These State approval agencies evaluate unaccredited programs of study. Where there are recognized accrediting agencies, State VA approval agencies have the option either of accepting the judgments of the accrediting agencies concerning educational quality or of evaluating the educational offerings as if they are not accredited.

Over the past 28 years, the Commissioner's charge to determine the reliability of accrediting agencies and associations has been reaffirmed in 25 other statutory authorities relating to the needs of at least six Federal agencies to have assurances provided concerning the quality of education or training offered by educational institutions or programs. These statutory authorities include four citations concerning the determination of an eligible institution of higher education--or an eligible vocational school--under the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended. Today, within the Office of Education alone, accreditation by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association is integral to an educational institution's or program's establishment of eligibility to apply for participation in some 25 Federal programs of support to education. While alternatives to meeting the statutory requirement for accreditation are provided for in most instances - but not in all - the great majority of postsecondary institutions that are eligible to participate in OE-administered programs--approximately 7,300 out of some 8,200 U.S. institutions--are eligible by virture of their accredited status with an agency or association recognized by the Commissioner of Education.

In order to carry out the Commissioner's mandate to determine which accrediting agencies and associations are reliable authorities concerning the quality of education or training offered by educational institutions or programs, the Commissioner of Education publishes Criteria for Nationally Recognized Accrediting Agencies and Associations. The first Criteria were published in the Federal Register of October 4, 1952. The Office of Education developed the Criteria in consultation with an advisory group of educators. The original Criteria have withstood the test of time rather well. Their nine basic elements are still identifiable in the third edition, published in 1974, which is currently in use. Findings emerging from a study of the

1974 Criteria, launched in 1977 by the Educational Testing Service under contract with USOE, indicate a high degree of validity regarding the current Criteria. The final report of the ETS Criteria study will be issued in June or July of this year.

The first of its lists of nationally recognized accrediting agencies and associations, which the Office of Education developed in cooperation with the National Commission on Accrediting, contained the names of the six regional accrediting associations and twenty-two national specialized accrediting agencies. The activity of the U.S. Office of Education during the initial 15 years of the Commissioner's list was minimal. Only eight accrediting agencies were added to the list during this time. And no agency or association, once listed, had its recognition status again reviewed by the Office.

Oversight of the Commissioner's recognition authority was at first an "in-house" responsibility; although, toward the end of the fifteen-year period, then U.S. Commissioner of Education, Harold Howe, created a small Accrediting Review Committee. This was a group of five educators from outside the government who provided invaluable policy advice to the Office of Education during the two-year period it functioned. This group, which was chaired by Frank G. Dickey, then Executive Director of the National Commission on Accrediting, is considered to be the forerunner of the current Advisory Committee on Accreditation and Institutional Eligibility.

The year 1968 brought changes affecting the Office of Education's accrediting agency review process. In that year, partly due to the urgings of education associations such as the National Commission on Accrediting, the Commissioner of Education created the Accreditation and Institutional Eligibility

Staff--now the Division of Eligibility and Agency Evaluation. The Staff's central purposes remain those of the current Division:

1. Continuous review of procedures, policies, and issues in the area of the Office of Education's interests and responsibilities relative to accreditation and eligibility for funding;
2. Administration of the eligibility for funding process for postsecondary educational institutions;
3. Administration of the process whereby accrediting associations secure initial and renewed recognition by the Commissioner of Education; and
4. Providing administrative support for the Advisory Committee on Accreditation and Institutional Eligibility.

At the same time, the Commissioner created the Advisory Committee on Accreditation and Institutional Eligibility, which now plays an essential role in the entire institutional eligibility process, including activities regarding accrediting agency recognition. Among other matters, the Advisory Committee recommends action to the Commissioner regarding petitions for recognition submitted by accrediting agencies, and by State approval agencies for nursing education and public postsecondary vocational education. It also reviews all current and future policies related to the Commissioner's responsibilities pertaining to overall eligibility matters, including recognition of accrediting agencies and State approval agencies. Additionally, it reviews the provisions of current legislation affecting the Office of Education's responsibility in the area of accreditation and institutional eligibility and suggests needed changes to the Commissioner.

Initially, the Advisory Committee consisted of nine nongovernmental educational leaders from the fields of accreditation and postsecondary

education. Later, as the work of the Committee increased, the Committee grew in size and representation -- first to twelve and then to fifteen members, representing both secondary and postsecondary education, the student/youth population, State departments of education, professional associations, and the general public.

By mid-1969, the Advisory Committe had formualted policy positions relative to accreditation and institutional eligibility that were adopted by the Commissioner. These polcies form the core of the policies and procedures currently affecting the recognition process. Two of them impact upon the character of the Commissioner's list.

--First, each accrediting agency listed by the Commissioner will be reevaluated by the Commissioner at his discretion, but a least once every four years.

--Second, in each instance where the Commissioner grants recognition or renewal of recognition to an accrediting agency or association, he will specifically define the scope of such recognition. An agency desiring to modify the scope of its recognition must petition the Office of Education for the desired change.

Each of the accrediting agencies and associations recognized by the Commissioner feels the impact of these two policies. The accrediting agencies that were listed prior to the development of 1969 policies were placed on a schedule that has brought each of them before the Advisory Committee for review at least twice in the past nine years. The process is a healthy and necessary one because of the dynamic character of the field of accreditation and of American education in general. Furthermore,

the Federal need in obtaining reliable information on educational quality remains intense.

The character of the Commissioner's list also changed during the early months of the Advisory Committee's operation. For the regional accrediting associations, the decision to designate the scope of the Commissioner's recognition meant that the 1969 list included only the seven higher education commissions as being recognized, instead of the six associations. The two regional vocational school commissions and four of the secondary commissions were added later, after they separately established compliance with USOE's Criteria. In 1969, the Southern Association's Commission on Occupational Education Institutions became the first regional non-collegiate education commission to be added to the Commissioner's list. In 1976, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges was reviewed as a whole and received recognition as a regional accrediting association. It is the only regional accrediting association currently recognized by the Commissioner. For the specialized accrediting agencies, the policy regarding designation of scope meant that the level and type of educational programs or institutions that they accredited would be specified by the Commissioner on the list of recognized agencies, and that requests for modification of the designated scope would be reviewed in terms of the Criteria for Recognition.

The early meetings of the Advisory Committee also found the Committee involved in reviewing and making recommendations concerning new Criteria for Recognition. Because of the many changes in the "art" of accreditation since 1952, as well as changes in Federal funding laws and in public expectations of accrediting agencies, it was evident that the 1952 Criteria were badly in need of overhaul and modernization.

The revised Criteria were published in January 1969. Building upon the base established by the 1952 Criteria, this second edition incorporated requirements concerning such additional aspects of the accreditation process as institutional self-study and on-site visits, the accrediting agency's or association's accordance of due process to applicants for accreditation, periodic review by the accrediting agency of its evaluative criteria, and the agency's enforcement of ethical practices among its accredited institutions or programs.

Also, several of the funding programs that were put into place in the 1960's permitted institutions or educational programs to satisfy the statutory requirement for accreditation by demonstrating "reasonable assurance of accreditation." Some accrediting agencies developed preaccreditation status categories to satisfy the requirement for demonstration of satisfactory assurance of accreditation. In order to establish if a preaccreditation category was a viable index of "satisfactory assurance," a requirement was added to the Criteria for Recognition that, "if the agency or association maintains a preaccreditation status, it shall have adequate procedures and requirements for the award of such status, comparable to those employed for accredited status."

During the next five years, the Accreditation and Institutional Eligibility Staff and the Commissioner's Advisory Committee worked in partnership to review approximately 85 petitions for renewal of recognition and 40 petitions (some repeat efforts) for initial recognition by the Commissioner. At the recommendation of the Advisory Committee, the Commissioner removed two agencies from his list for failure to demonstrate compliance with the Criteria for Recognition. No agency voluntarily withdrew from the list. During

this period, the first secondary school accrediting agency received initial recognition from the Commissioner, the National Accreditation Council for Agencies Serving the Blind and Visually Handicapped. It was followed by four regional secondary school accrediting commissions. Also, by the end of the 1969-1974 period there was a significant expansion of the scope of the Commissioner's recognition of the American Medical Association's accreditation program for allied health education, due to the rapid development of accreditation programs for newly emerging allied health professions.

It is not possible to move out of a discussion of the 1969-74 period without mentioning, at least in passing, the so-called Mondale Amendment, which was contained in the Education Amendments of 1972. The Mondale Amendment offers public postsecondary vocational institutions an alternative in meeting the accreditation requirement contained in the eligibility provisions of the student financial assistance programs. It requires the Commissioner of Education to publish a list of State agencies that he has recognized as reliable authorities concerning the quality of education or training offered by public postsecondary vocational institutions. In 1974, an initial list of eight such State agencies was published by the Commissioner. Some of the State agencies that achieved initial recognition later voluntarily withdrew from the list, as the institutions they approved achieved status with a regional accrediting commission. Today that list contains ten State agencies.

The Criteria for Recognition of State Agencies for Approval of Public Postsecondary Vocational Education were developed in tandem with the third edition of the Criteria for Nationally Recognized Accrediting Agencies and Associations. The evolution of the third edition, which was adopted in August 1974 along with the State agency Criteria, involved a consensus-building process leading

to the final product. Drafts were widely circulated prior to publication of the revision for formal comment under Notice of Proposed Rulemaking. These preliminary drafts were circulated to the recognized accrediting agencies and associations, to potential applicants for recognition, to national education organizations, State education officers, student groups, and selected heads of institutions and other interested and knowledgeable persons. In addition, Office of Education officials held several meetings with the accreditation community to discuss proposed revisions.

Still in effect, the third edition of the Criteria for Nationally Recognized Accrediting Agencies and Associations builds upon the two earlier versions. The events, trends, groups, personalities, studies, and organizational developments that impacted upon the 1974 Criteria are too numerous to catalog here. But the most important impact upon the Criteria was acceptance of the thesis that the private accrediting agencies had become quasi-public in character. This thesis was acknowledged in the acceptance, by the organizations and individuals whom the Office involved in reviewing the proposed Criteria, of additional due process requirements, of requirements designed to protect the consumer of education and of provision for better information about the accreditation process to the public at large.

The 1974 Criteria are organized into four sections concerning first, the functional aspects of accrediting agencies, their responsibility, their reliability, and their autonomy. A comparison of the 1969 Criteria with the 1974 Criteria quickly reveals that nearly all the 1969 Criteria were incorporated into the sections of the 1974 Criteria dealing with functional aspects, reliability, and autonomy. It is the section dealing with the responsibility

of accrediting agencies that contains the additional criteria--the criteria that reflect the quasi-public nature of accreditation.

The Office of Eduation's experience in administering the Criteria over the past four years confirms their broad applicability. During the period from Septemb[illegible] through June 1979, the Advisory Committee conducted approximately 225 reviews of accrediting bodies seeking either initial recognition or renewal of recognition. Today, the Commissioner's list of recognized accrediting agencies contains 75 agencies in fields as diverse as cosmetology, interior design, theology and medicine. The number of regional accrediting commissions recognized by the Commissioner stands at thirteen. Of the 62 recognized national institutional and programmatic agencies, a little over half function in the health area. The latest additions to the Commissioner's list are agencies accrediting dance and theater education and postdoctoral degrees in medical microbiology.

When proposed revisions to the Criteria for Recognition were being prepared last year for formal public comment under the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking procedure, the scope of the Commissioner's list of nationally recognized accrediting agencies and associations was challenged by certain parties and became a subject of much discussion and review. Some factions argue that USOE has exceeded the Commissioner's authority by listing accrediting agencies and associations that do not have a direct eligibility for funding function. They further argue that the "broadened" recognition authority: (1) creates additional costs to the taxpayer for unnecessary reviews, (2) generates proliferation of accrediting agencies, and (3) implies that USOE serves as an "enfranchiser" of accrediting bodies.

Federal statutes require the Commissioner of Education to publish a list of accrediting agencies and associations which he determines to be reliable authorities as to the quality of training or education offered by educational institutions or programs. All the agencies listed by the Commissioner fully or substantially meet the published Criteria for Recognition. Moreover, the variety of Federal statutes and regulations utilizing accreditation status sometimes provides a shifting picture regarding the manner and degree to which an accrediting agency's judgments are utilized in determining eligibility for Federal funding, or in facilitating other Federal goals. In addition to the Federal agencies that utilize the Commissioner's list of accrediting agencies to fulfill educational quality determinations decreed by statute, at least 23 other Federal agencies, by administrative custom or regulation, utilize it for funding eligibility, employment status and other relevant purposes. The Commissioner's list should continue to be such that it can be utilized by <u>all</u> Federal agencies that need to identify educational quality and integrity.

Regarding the idea that USOE serves as an "enfranchiser" of accreditation, thereby creating proliferation of accrediting activities, we note that there are numerous educational accrediting agencies and associations that currently are in operation although they are not listed by the Commissioner, including two agencies which have been removed from the Commissioner's list for cause. Proliferation of accreditation is generated by broad social forces over which the Office of Education has little or no control. While it is desirable to prevent unnecessary proliferation and duplication of accrediting activities,

however that might be defined, it must be remembered that accrediting agencies are self-generated organizations. The U.S. Office of Education has no authority to determine whether or not an accrediting agency or association should exist, and we do not seek such authority.

Although the 1979 Criteria revision project has been overtaken - and overshadowed - by other events of 1979 that impact upon the accrediting agency recognition function, the Office of Education's concern for the effectiveness of the Criteria by which the Commissioner determines whether or not accrediting agencies are reliable authorities concerning educational quality has not diminished. I already have referred to the Educational Testing Service's project, which we hope will support both the substance of the current Criteria and the reliability of our accrediting agency review process. When the results of that study are published this summer, we will have an important task before us as we consider the findings and conclusions of the study.

In the meantime, there are two events of the past year that may have a significant impact upon the Federal Government's relationship with private accrediting agencies and associations. First, there is the Administration's July 1979 proposal to remove accreditation as an eligibility requirement for institutions and programs that apply for eligibility to participate in the funding programs provided by the Higher Education Act, in favor of an eligibility system consisting of State authorization agencies and oversight by Federal program administrators. However, both the House of Representatives and the Senate have rejected the proposal, and it is apparent that the reauthorized Higher Education Act will retain the linkage between accreditation and eligibility.

The second event of great importance to accrediting agencies is the forthcoming launching of the new Department of Education. Presumably, the new Department will have an opportunity for re-evaluating the Administration's 1979 proposal to remove accreditation as an eligibility factor for Higher Education Act programs.

Critics of the Office of Education's relationship with the nationally recognized accrediting agencies sometimes fail to look beyond the requirements and procedures of the USOE recognition process for an understanding of how the various functions of the Office and DEAE serve to support accreditation in the United States.

In addition to the elementary fact that OE recognition conveys status to the recognized accrediting agencies through linkages to Federal funding programs, it can be noted that the Division of Eligibility and Agency Evaluation has served to assist other governmental bodies, both Federal and State, in developing an understanding of the accreditation process. Whenever various Federal components have developed positions or proposals which DEAE believes to have the potential for adverse impact on accrediting agencies, the Division has attempted to educate these other parties regarding the inappropriateness of their proposals and to clarify for them the true nature and purpose of accreditation. On a number of occasions, DEAE has counseled state officials regarding proposed State legislation affecting accreditation, and has worked with accrediting agencies and educational associations on a number of occasions in a role as buffer between accreditation and inappropriate governmental intrusion.

Another facet of the Office of Education's role in supporting accreditation is its capability for funding research projects which can be directly beneficial to the accreditation community. One such USOE-funded project, which was initiated in 1977 under the direction of the American Institutes for Research, involved the college and occupational school commissions of the New England Association, the college commission of the North Central Association, and the senior college commission of the Western Association in a field test of new institutional self-study forms. This project proved successful, and accrediting agencies now have available a useful new instrument for the evaluation process.

Over the years, the Division of Eligibility and Agency Evaluation, either in cooperation with other organizations or by itself, has sponsored numerous special conferences dealing with a variety of topics of interest to the accreditation community. Among these were the earlier conferences on the self-study as an evaluative technique, due process in accreditation, accreditation and the public interest, and educational consumer protection. In 1975, DEAE sponsored the National Invitational Conference on Institutional Eligibility, which affirmed accreditation's role as an essential element in the Federal eligibility for funding process. More recently, in conjunction with the June 1977 meeting of the Commissioner of Education's Advisory Committee on Accreditation and Institutional Eligibility, an invitational conference on the Federal government's relationship to the Nationally Recognized Accrediting Agencies was convened in order to provide members of the Advisory Committee on Accreditation and Institutional Eligibility and representatives of accrediting agencies with an opportunity to review and discuss issues of mutual interest. As evidence that this conference

did serve to enhance a constructive relationship between the accrediting agencies and the U.S. Office of Education, the accreditation community offered its support for a continuing dialogue between DEAE and the Advisory Committee, on the one hand, and the accrediting agencies, on the other. The first of a series of workshops involving small groups of accrediting agency representatives and Advisory Committee members was held on November 2-3, 1977, with an agenda suggested by the accrediting agencies.

In April 1980, the Division co-sponsored the National Forum on Accreditation of Allied Health Education. Among other issues, the Forum focused on those of proliferation and costs of accrediting activities in postsecondary education.

Among the educational organizations which have joined in a partnership relation with DEAE by co-sponsoring conferences with the Division are the following: National Commission on Accrediting, Federation of Regional Accrediting Commissions of Higher Education, Council of Regional School Accrediting Commissions, American Vocational Association, National Study of School Evaluation, Education Commission of the States, American Society for Allied Health Professions, Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, and the Commission on Vocational, Technical, Career Institutions of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges.

A final area for consideration involving the Division's support of private accreditation is one which some accrediting agencies find distressing at

times. This is the one-to-one relationship of the Office to the individual accrediting agency in the review for recognition process. Yet here, too, can be found evidence of positive working relationships. For example, current Criteria for Nationally Recognized Accrediting Agencies and Associations (published in August 1974) were developed by a consensus-building process involving a wide range of constituencies, including both recognized accrediting agencies and potential applicants for recognition. As a result of DEAE's circulation of the proposed revised Criteria on at least four separate occasions during the period 1972-74, the Criteria were developed and published as final regulation with only four letters of further comment requiring response. In addition to the consensus-building process used in the development of the 1974 Criteria, the Division has taken a further step designed to ensure their validity by contracting with the Educational Testing Service for a validation study. The report of this project is expected to be published by July 1980. Its direct benefits to accreditation will be reflected in the potential improvement of the quality of the Division's own review process. Indirectly, the project may suggest to accrediting agencies directions which they may take in constructing programs for validating their own standards.

The Division's involvement of the accreditation community in development of the Criteria for Recognition has helped make the review process a positive experience for the individual accrediting agency applying for initial recognition or renewal of recognition by the Commissioner of Education. Based upon the practices generally accepted within the accreditation community, the Criteria provide an evaluative tool by which the individual accrediting agency can assess its own operations. In many respects, the completion of a petition for the Commissioner's recognition of an accrediting agency is

parallel to the accreditation self-evaluation process undertaken by institutions. Accrediting bodies often find they gain additional insight into their own operations from the Office of Education review process. Frequently, the process will provide the rationale or impetus for improvement of one or more aspects of an accrediting agency's operations.

The 1974 Criteria for Recognition are highly significant because of specific content which serves to strengthen accrediting agencies, make them more effective agents of educational self-governance, and establish them as valid and reliable organizations in the public mind. Concerning the functional aspects of accreditation, the Criteria seek to ensure that an accrediting agency or association has adequate administrative and financial support, that it engages individuals in the accreditation process who are competent and kowledgeable, that its procedures are both clearly written and provide for two major elements of the accreditation process--institutional or program self-evaluation and on-site review by representatives of the accrediting agency. The Criteria seek also to ascertain the responsibility of an accrediting agency or association, and, in this connection, include important considerations regarding responsiveness to the public interest, due process in accrediting procedures, and the review and validation of educational standards. An accrediting agency's acceptance on a national basis by the various constituencies to whom its services relate, and its reflection of the community of interests directly affected by its operations in the composition of its policy and decision-making bodies, are indicators included in the Criteria to assess reliability. Finally, the Criteria indicate the Office of Education's expectations regarding the autonomy of the accreditation process. It is the position of the Office of Education that an accrediting agency which is in compliance with the letter and spirit

of the Criteria is indeed a reliable authority concerning the quality of the educational institutions or programs which it accredits.

There always will be tension points between the Federal Government and the nationally recognized accrediting agencies and associations. Such tensions are inherent in situations where private agencies are called upon to perform functions in the public arena within a situation of interface with Government. However, the Office of Education, particularly its Division of Eligibility and Agency Evaluation, has a well-established record of providing support for private accreditation and of attempting to ease tensions as they emerge. No study in the twenty-eight year history of the Commissioner of Education's list of nationally recognized accrediting agencies and associations has ever arrived at a viable substitute for accreditation concerning judgments about the quality of educational institutions or programs seeking to participate in Federal funding programs. So long as the Office of Education and the accreditation community are bound together in the relationship constructed out of the Commissioner's statutory recognition authority, and so long as accrediting agencies are functioning in a responsible and effective manner, the Office will continue to work with the nationally recognized accrediting agencies and associations in a constructive and supportive fashion.

It is important to note that this commitment of support for accreditation by the Office has the operational effect of precluding the development by the Office of any plans to control, supplant or compete with the recognized accrediting agencies. This very well may be the most significant benefit of all flowing from the relationship between the Office and the accrediting community.

In conclusion, I wish to pay tribute to the professionalism and cooperative spirit of the great majority of the officials of accrediting agencies with whom we have dealt. Our relationships generally have been constructive and mutually beneficial. When we have made mistakes with individual accrediting agencies, their leaders have not felt constrained to call this to our attention - but nearly always in a professional manner.